

Online Learning in Washington State

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March 2011

Key Findings

1. Tapping the power of the Internet could transform today's factory school model to an individual mastery-based model centered on individual student needs.
2. Online learning makes better use of limited school resources.
3. Only a small percentage of students in Washington are benefiting from online learning.
4. Washington's ban on charter schools prevents school officials from using cutting-edge technology to help students learn.
5. Offering online choices increases parental involvement.

Introduction

If today's students are to thrive in the modern, knowledge-based global economy, public schools will have to provide individual learning in a way that is nearly impossible with the current 19th-century education system. By tapping the power of the internet, however, education officials can transform today's centralized, factory-style school model into one that is more affordable, mastery-based and centered on students. As pointed out in *Education Week*:

"There is far more standardization than customization in schools. Schools teach using a monolithic batch system. When a class is ready to move on to a new concept, all students move on, regardless of how many have mastered the previous concept (even if it is a prerequisite for learning what is next).... Both the bored and the bewildered see their motivation for achievement shredded by the system."

One solution is online learning. Online learning makes better use of limited school resources. And when classroom loads are lightened through online curricula, each teacher has more time to help individual students.

In 2010 more than 12,000 K-12 students in Washington took full-time online courses. Yet this represents a small percentage, less than two percent, of the state's 980,000 public school students. Clearly, online learning has the potential to reach far more students, especially those who do not thrive in a traditional classroom setting.

Online Learning in Washington

Our legislature has authorized all 295 school districts to create their own online programs. The problem is that while school officials are required to write online learning policies, they do not have to offer students access to actual courses, or to give students school credit for taking them.

This attitude stands in sharp contrast to charter public schools in other states that use cutting-edge technology to reach students. For example, low-income students at Rocketship Mateo Sheedy Elementary in San Jose, California, spend 90 minutes a day online, where they learn basic skills with adaptive technology, like innovative DreamBox software. Rocketship students receive one quarter of their instruction this way, allowing teachers to give extra help to struggling students. This frees up \$500,000 in staffing costs which are devoted to teacher salaries and training. It works. Rocketship schools rank among the 15 top-performing high-poverty schools California.

Other examples of teachers using technology in new ways to achieve great results for students are New York City's School of One, Denver's School of

Science and Technology, and San Diego's High Tech High.

Unfortunately charter schools are banned in Washington, making it harder for similar creative teaching methods to take root here. Part of the reason is the union strongly opposes charter public schools, and unions have argued against giving students access to online programs.

Increased Investment in Education

Washington law does allow school districts to contract with private education companies to provide students with online educational services. This means online students can benefit from the capital investment and instructional expertise these companies provide. Some online education companies use the top-rated K-12 Inc. curriculum, a nationally-recognized learning program that uses research in cognitive science, to help students develop mastery in math, science, reading and other core subjects.

Another way school districts can take advantage of private investment in education is through blended learning programs. Blended online learning combines online course content with local, in-person instruction. Students can learn at their own pace using online tutorials, and still receive individual guidance from a classroom instructor. This frees the teacher's time to focus on problem areas that are slowing student progress, while allowing students to engage in self-directed study in areas they can master on their own.

There is little evidence school administrators in Washington are making use of the blended online learning approach. This may be because regulatory restrictions, such as classroom size limitations imposed by the state, discourage education companies that excel in providing students with individualized blended instruction from offering their services in Washington state.

Increased Parental Involvement

Online programs increase parents' involvement in their child's education. Part of the funding a student receives in a traditional public school is re-directed to the online program of the parent's choice. In this way, the education money can be clearly tracked and is directly linked to student achievement. Budget data show that full-time online programs educate students for thousands of dollars less than the yearly average of \$10,200 per student taxpayers give to traditional schools. The savings can be used to strengthen other education programs in our state.

Washington has the potential to extend online learning opportunities to far more students. The state Digital Learning Department offers a catalog of over 600 online courses provided by private education companies. The catalog also includes a digital library, teaching resources, college and career planning tools, online tutors, student focus groups and other learning tools. Online courses cost only \$155 to \$350 per course, far less than traditional classroom instruction.

Conclusion

Washington school officials are missing out on an important opportunity. At a time when students carry more computing power in their pockets than the Apollo spacecraft carried to the moon, officials should be open to new ways of educating. Wider adoption of the online programs offered by the state would let students learn in a tech-friendly educational system that fits the 21st century, instead of one that dates from the steam age.

Liv Finne is Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center, a non-partisan independent policy research organization in Washington state. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body. For more information visit washingtonpolicy.org.